

Hiking Journals

Mauna Loa Trail

by Kelly Villaverde

We visited the rangers on a Thursday morning and got squared away then had relatives drive the three of us (all friends, Geoff, Brad and me) to the trailhead at 6700'. I can't remember exactly what time we started, but I remember the estimated time to complete the hike was 4 to 6 hours and we did it in 5 1/2, getting there well into the afternoon.

Geoff discovered that he'd developed the largest blisters we'd ever seen and was seriously considering turning back. I tend to overpack, which on this trip was a mixed blessing. On the bad side, my pack was not a very good one. It was too large for its meager compression capabilities, the hipbelt was not nearly stiff enough and in general, it simply was not good enough for such a climb. On the good side, I had packed a pair of beat-up running shoes just in case, and it turned out to be Geoff's saving grace, for though his boots only aggravated the blisters, after a good ER session with Brad and me, he was able to finish the hike with my runners. I still tend to overpack, but now it is much more manageable with my Jansport Alaska. It is a fine pack that makes 50+ lbs. doable (though I'm trying to keep things more reasonable these days.)

We had dinner and played some cards or something then hit the hay. Unfortunately, while I had some bread and oatmeal, I think, the boys had something like Spanish rice and beans. The aroma got so bad during the wee hours that we actually had to open the door even with the frigid temps. I made them promise NEVER to eat that again on any of our hikes! Hey, we aren't proud of that night, but it IS part of the story.

We rose early knowing that an 8 to 12 hour hike was ahead of us. The two things that struck me the most about the trail:

1. After the initial few miles, especially after the Red Hill cabin, there is nothing but lava rock. Rock as far as you can see. So, while Brad suffered from a sort of hiking ennui for a couple of hours, Geoff and I saw the place as fascinating, a stark kind of beauty. Afterwards, however, we all agreed that it was worth it and we'd do it again.
2. Though the trail is generally not very steep, it is almost unrelentingly up, up, up. There are precious few places that are flat.



*On the way to the summit
lava lava everywhere*



*On the edge of North Pit
about to cross the lava sea!*

There was one part where we had stopped for a breather and all of a sudden watched with mounting alarm a bank of clouds moving toward us with, as I recall, greater and greater rapidity. We hustled on up, hoping to hit the top before getting hit with weather, but as it turned out, they moved on and the rest of the day, we had fine weather.



We got em almost there!

We finally made the summit cabin in just over 8 hours, so we felt pretty good about that. We had quite the mock argument over reaching the top. The boys said that, no matter how high we'd gotten, we did not actually "summit". I agreed. My argument, however, went something like this: if someone is airlifted and dropped on the "actual" summit and I trek 19 miles to the "summit cabin", the other person is truly "on" the top, but NOBODY can say that I didn't climb the mountain. Anyway, we plan on getting to the actual summit next time around ... we'll see if it happens.

The night was cold but luckily, the boys did not have the beans. Whew! On Saturday, we awoke and packed, leaving mid-morning. We went down the Observatory way and had another friend pick us up and ended up in Hilo later that day.



The most scenic pit toilet !